

Critical Issues -Visual Culture

Course Outline

Why would someone make an all black painting? Who cares if the Nike *swoosh* or Starbucks logo is more recognizable than a map of the Middle East? Must everyone in a democracy have an equal right to his or her own cultural expression? This class examines issue of ethics, beauty, cultural inclusion, and radical opposition all the while asking what role art-making and human vision play in our post-industrial, hyper visual society. The class is structured around weekly readings and lectures made by the instructor and class members. Students are responsible to read, enter into discussion and write a series of response papers as well as one longer research paper that is also presented to the class. This is a 300 level class.

Requirements:

Participation and attendance is **REQUIRED**. Your level of participation figures heavily in your overall evaluation and grade. Please note that more than **THREE** unexcused absences will result in a deduction from one's final grade. A Student may be dismissed from the class after seven unexcused absences.

You are responsible for reading and discussing all assigned readings, five short papers due the week following their assignment, a research paper of ten to twelve pages and two class presentations. The first class presentation involves leading a discussion on one of the assigned readings. The second presentation is based on the final research paper and takes place during the final two weeks of the course. The subject of the research paper is to be worked out in advance with the instructor.

Evaluation:

- 30% Participation in class
 - 10% Five one-page papers
 - 40 % Class presentation
 - 20% Final paper (10-12 pages)
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SYLLABUS

* Note: substitutions of scheduled readings, guest speakers, or presentations may take place and on short notice.

Readings for week 1:

Williams, Raymond, "Culture", "Art", and "Democracy" definitions from
Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society.
Revised Edition, NY Oxford, 1976, 1983 pp. 41-45, & 87-98.

- *First Writing Assignment:* Please write a one-page response to the following questions and deliver to me by email. Be prepared to discuss your views during class: Who gets to define "culture"? For whom and to what end? How does culture relate to democracy? Or the economy and marketplace? Is there more than one type of culture in the US today?

Week 1: are we cultured yet?

The instructor introduces the course and assignments as well as his expectations and his background. Students also introduce themselves and their expectations of the class. This is followed by a discussion of *Keywords* by Raymond Williams. Questions to be discussed include, how does the idea of culture emerging from an organic community compare with that of culture as a conscious political construction? What aesthetic, ethical and civic outlook might result from taking one or the other of these positions? Can either pessimism or perversity be acceptable positions for artists to take in relation to society?

- *Second Writing Assignment:* Between now and next weeks class please email me a one page follow-up to the first assignment in light of our initial discussion. If your position has not altered, explain why this is so. If it has, clarify your new take on the question of culture and society.

Reading for week 2: Plato, "Book X" of *The Republic*.

Week 2: the artist as public enemy

Following a discussion of the reading and a screening of excerpts from the video: Serbian Epics, the class will divide into two debate teams. Using contemporary examples one team will defend and one will critique Plato's position that states the artist should be excluded from the "ideal" society.

- *Third reading assignment:* Please write a one page paper describing a specific example of how the economy has shaped a particular aspect of your social experience.

Readings for week 3:

Karl Marx and Frederik Engels, excerpts from *The German Ideology*.
Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography."

Week 3: is art merely another commodity?

Questions for debate: What does Marx achieve by turning idealism "on his head"? What is the concept of base and superstructure suggested by the text and is it useful today for analyzing contemporary culture? How do Benjamin's ideas about photography apply a materialist theory of knowledge to art? The instructor and a class member will present different aspects of these influential ideas.

Reading for week 5:

Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism."
Sigmund Freud, selections from "Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis."

Week 5: art as liberation?

A presentation about surrealist art including a screening of Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* is followed by a discussion about early twentieth ideas regarding the radical transformation of society through psychic liberation. The role of the artist in visualizing desire is a point of discussion.

Readings for week 5:

Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting."
Theodore Adorno, "Black as an Ideal."

Week 5: Modernism anyone?

Turning to issues of specific types of artistic practice we examine the ideas of two very influential writers on modernist art theory. The instructor will make a slide presentation using the Adorno text as his point of departure. Ideas of autonomy and disinterestedness are presented in detail and set the stage for the following weeks reading on postmodernism. A member(s) of the class will lead in a discussion of the Greenberg essay (with slides)

Reading for week 6: Fredric Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism."

Week 6: Postmodernism and after

Questions for discussion: From Kant to Greenberg, the autonomy of art from popular culture, politics, and society has been a central feature of western aesthetics and institutions. But if we accept Jameson's description of the post-modernist era, what has been gained and what lost in terms of aesthetics and cultural identity? What changes in art institutions have grown out of this paradigm shift? How might one manage the presentation and management of a post-modern culture and what does it imply in terms of the artist and the public for art in the years ahead?

- *Forth writing assignment:* Please write a one page paper that describes in your own terms and using your own examples the shift from a modernist to post-modern aesthetic. Give examples of what appears consistent and what seems different between the two outlooks. Conclude your paper by commenting on the way a post-modern outlook might affect your career when compared to the previous generation of arts administrators.

Reading for week 7:

Edward Said "In the Shadow of the West."
Tinh T. Minh-ha, "No Master Territories."

Week 7: visualizing Others

A screening of excerpts from Chris Marker's film, *Sans Soleil* and Minh-ha's film, *Living in the Round* will be followed by a discussion lead by the instructor and a member of the class based on the Said and Minh-ha texts. Topics include who has the right to speak for "others" as well as the question of representation itself as an act of "violence."

Readings for week 8:

Franz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness" (1952)
Stuart Hall, *New Ethnicities* (1989)
Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "The Black Man's Burden" (1993)

Week 8: identity, difference, self-representation

A member of the class will lead in the reading and discussion of the Fanon text. Another will lead in the discussion of the Hall essay and a third in the Gates Jr. text. Questions for discussion: European and Anglo philosophy has tended to assume a particular ethnic identity for those who read and write. The writers of these essays however argue that one's sense of identity and social status is affected by the way we appear to others. But in an ideal, democratic society should such differences be taken into account? Is there such a thing as "color blind" casting for example? And if identity is not natural but is instead formed by culture should special exhibitions, programs, and even museums be devoted to people of a particular race, gender, or sexual orientation? By the same token, should the kinds of artwork, writing, music and theater one presents as an arts administrator (or instructor) reflect a broader idea of culture or cultures?

Reading for week 9: Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control" (1990).

- *Fifth writing assignment:* A one page paper that draws on your personal experience and that of your family to imagine what the workplace of the future will be like. Provide as much detail about specific aspects of work as possible for example security, efficiency, computer training, salary, overtime and so forth.

Week 9: welcome to the *Society of Control*

Questions for debate: Defend and critique the similarity and differences that cultural institutions, such as museums, television, theater and universities, share with the models of human consciousness and society presented by Michel Foucault and Giles Deleuze. Is it possible to think or act outside the society of discipline? How about outside or against the society of control? Assuming escape from these institutional frameworks is conceivable at all, speaking as an arts administrator do you ignore, nurture, or eliminate this other, and what are the implications of each position?

Readings for week 10:

Thomas Frank, excerpts from: One Market Under God & The Conquest of Cool

- *Special assignment:* Students will bring to class an example of an advertisement, movie poster or other visual product that represents the transformation of alternative, underground or radical culture into a commodity.

Week 10: commodify your dissent!

A discussion and visual presentation about the selling of the counter-culture by corporate marketers to mainstream America. Students will discuss the examples of "commodified" counter-culture they have brought to class.

Readings for week 11:

Gregory Sholette "Nature as an Icon of Urban Resistance: Artists, Gentrification and New York City's Lower East Side, 1979-1984." *Afterimage* Sept./Oct. 1997
Craig Owens, "The Problem with Pluralism..."

Week 11: Naked City, New York's 1980s Lower East Side as cultural battlefield.

Shifting to an examination of possible models of dissent within the visual arena the instructor makes a slide presentation based on his own experience in NYC with, alternative and activist art groups of the 1980's including ABC No Rio Dinero; Colaborative Projects; Group Material, & Political Art

Documentation and Distribution (or PAD/D). Topics for discussion include the unseen history of art as a force for social change, gentrification and the response to particular historical and cultural circumstances by artists within a given location.

Reading for week 12:

Excerpts from *Five Days That Shook the World: Seattle and Beyond*, by Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, with photographs by Allan Sekula.

Week 12 : art and the counter-globalization movement

The instructor and one or more students will make a presentation on the way disparate groups of artists, activists, communities have worked together to raise critical issues about the process of globalization and trans-national capitalism. Among the topics focused on include the way new technologies shape the structure of these organizations and if the counter-globalization movement represents a new form of counter-culture or a passing moment in what Deleuze pessimistically called the society of control.

Reading for week 13: Slavoj Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*.

Week 13: representation's limits and the horrific

The instructor leads a discussion about the consequences the various readings and known consequences following the events of September 11th, 2001. Excerpts from John Carpenter's "They" and The Matrix will be screened and discussed in light of the Zizek essay. Issues of visualizing collective action and the challenge of representing severe trauma are among the topics covered.

- Scheduling of the final week's presentations.

Week 14 & 15:

Reserved for final class presentations.

***Note:** Several useful glossaries of theory-related terms can be found today including one in the book Art History and its Methods: a Critical Anthology edited by Eric Fernie. (Phaidon Press: London 1995.) There is also a book entitled Artspeak that has another glossary.*